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WHAT WENT WRONG?

THE MINERS'S STRIKE has raised some fundamental questions. Some socialists will argue that the miners should never have fought, that they were bound to be beaten, and that their defeat requires a complete re-appraisal of the left's strategy. Others will unconditionally defend the miners' leaders, especially Arthur Scargill, placing all the blame for the defeat on the TUC and Labour Party leadership. In this final chapter, we consider these arguments, and draw what seem to us to be the political lessons of the miners' epic struggle.

Was defeat inevitable?

People have given a number of reasons for regarding the miners' defeat as inevitable. Some simply say that the strike was doomed from the start — that the NUM should not have taken up the Coal Board's challenge, coming as it did in the spring and at a time when coal stocks were at unprecedented levels.

It is certainly true that the strike took place at a time and on ground not of the miners' choosing. The **Sunday Times**, a supporter of Thatcher's policies, admitted: 'There are good reasons for thinking that the timing of the dispute, and the choice of battleground on which it has been fought was deliberately engineered by the government so that it could take place on the government's terms.'¹

But workers are often forced to fight in less than ideal conditions. The miners' union had in the three years before the strike suffered a series of major setbacks — the 'No' votes in three successive strike ballots, and the failure to prevent pit closures in Scotland and South Wales. Had the NCB been able to force through closures in

Yorkshire, the stronghold of the NUM left, then effective resistance to mass redundancies in the coalfields would have collapsed. The door would have been open to the sort of massive contraction and restructuring of the mining industry which other sectors of industry such as steel and engineering had already experienced.

Had the miners' union not taken up the challenge in March 1984 the result would have been a defeat at least as devastating and demoralising as any resulting from the strike. Had the miners capitulated without a fight, then Thatcher's offensive against the British working class would indeed have seemed unstoppable. The very length and scale of the strike, its political and financial cost to the Tories, revealed the miners' strength, and the impact workers can have when they fight back.

So whatever our criticisms of the miners' leaders, they were absolutely right to fight when they did. Despite their vacillations and the enormous errors they committed, they did something to restore the honour of the British trade union movement after nearly five years of supine acceptance of Thatcherism.

There are some who accept that the NUM had no choice but to fight, but argue that the failure to hold a national strike ballot doomed the strike to defeat. This argument was made from the very beginning of the strike, not only by the Labour right wing, but also in other, more surprising quarters, for example, by members of the Communist Party such as Bea Campbell, and by an ultra-left sect called the Revolutionary Communist Party. These strange bedfellows say that a national ballot would have almost certainly resulted in a 'Yes' vote. This would have re-united the miners and closed down the Nottinghamshire coalfield.

It is important to understand that the argument about the ballot is not about democracy in the abstract, whatever Labour leader Neil Kinnock might say. The Tories support secret ballots because of the *sort* of democracy they involve, one that reduces workers to passive and isolated individuals vulnerable to the barrage of capitalist propaganda launched at them by the mass media.

The most basic aim of workers' organisation is to overcome this atomisation, and to mobilise their collective strength as a class. This involves a different kind of democracy, one based on workers as a collective, in which decisions are taken openly after the issues have been argued out at mass meetings. These two political forms, the capitalist democracy of the state, and the workers' democracy embryonic in trade union organisation, were starkly counterposed

during the miners' strike.

In any case, the Tories' attitude to even their own sort of democracy is highly pragmatic. They are in favour of secret ballots when they win them; when they lose, their attitude changes. The courts happily overrode the defeat of the pit incentive scheme in the October 1977 ballot, and Thatcher shamelessly denied the GCHQ workers a vote over the withdrawal of their trade union rights. Socialists should be equally pragmatic about ballots.

The reason Tories demanded a ballot was that a vote taken before the pickets went out in March would have ensured there was no strike — as was shown by the Area votes in South Wales, Derbyshire and elsewhere.

By mid April, a ballot might have gone the other way. According to a MORI opinion poll 68 per cent of miners supported a strike, as opposed to 26 per cent against and only 6 per cent undecided.²

But the consequences of a 'No' vote would have been catastrophic. It would have been the fourth successive defeat for the NUM left in a strike ballot — and this after the Tories had thrown down the gauntlet and the overwhelming majority of miners had been on strike for over a month. Such an outcome would have been quite likely — the press and TV campaign for a 'No' vote in the run-up to such a ballot would have been unprecedented. The majority of strikers, who were not actively involved in picketing, might well have succumbed to this campaign, and to the mounting economic pressures of a lengthening strike. In the aftermath of a defeat for the strike in a ballot, even if the more militant Areas had stayed out, the government and the NCB would have been able, in time, to ride roughshod over the industry.

The situation would have been different if NUM leaders had operated differently — if Jack Taylor had not tried to restrain the Yorkshire pickets from going to Nottinghamshire; if Ray Chadburn and Henry Richardson had not denounced the pickets and demanded a ballot during the early weeks of the strike; if Arthur Scargill had not failed to campaign in Nottinghamshire during that crucial first month; if there had been concerted efforts to involve rank-and-file miners actively in the strike, then Nottinghamshire would have been closed down in the same way as other Areas that voted no in local ballots, and the question of a national ballot would have been academic. As it was, Scargill was right not to take the risk.

There is a third argument used by those who say defeat was inevitable: that the Tories were unbeatable because of the power of the state they controlled. This assertion takes a variety of forms. Some

draw on the relatively sophisticated analysis provided by the **Marxism Today** team of 'Thatcherism' as a new form of capitalist rule based on direct ideological appeal to the masses, backed up by a strengthened repressive state apparatus. Others have argued, more straightforwardly, that Britain under Thatcher is becoming a police state, or even a fascist state.

The nub of the argument, whatever its forms, is that there has been a decisive shift in the way in which the British ruling class operates, in which mobilising the consent of the ruled has increasingly been replaced by far greater reliance on coercion. The book **State of Siege** by Jim Coulter, Susan Miller and Martin Walker, while collecting much valuable evidence of how the strike has been policed, strongly conveys the impression that there has been a radical change in how the state operates under the Tories.

The truth is more complex. Capital has ruled Britain ever since the defeat of Chartism in the 1840s through a combination of force and consent. The ruling class have, on the one hand, sought to incorporate the workers' movement within the existing order through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy. On the other hand, the repressive state apparatus — the police and sometimes the army — has regularly been used against sections of the working class whose struggles threaten this pattern.

The precise balance between force and consent has varied over the years, depending on the level of class struggle and the relative strengths of capital and labour. There were violent confrontations between workers and the state during the Labour Unrest of 1910–14 and the General Strike and lockout of 1926. For a decade or more after 1926 mining communities in Nottinghamshire and South Wales experienced savage running battles between supporters of the miners' union and scabs protected by the police. Brutal punishment was meted out to unemployed marchers in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, at the same time the state relied heavily on the trade union bureaucracy to ensure that militant sections of the class, then led by the Communist Party, were isolated. Precisely the same was true of the miners' strike of 1984–5. As we have seen, the leaders of other unions exploited the NUM's struggle to screw minor concessions out of the Tories, leaving the miners to fight on alone despite all the resolutions passed by the TUC and Labour Party conferences.

The role of the police was primarily to help prevent the miners from picketing effectively. But state repression was not responsible for the lack of real solidarity action. That was the achievement of the trade

union leaders. Without the sabotage of the right-wing leaders and the failure of the left leaders, Thatcher could not have beaten the miners.

There is a more specific version of the argument about the role of the state in the strike — namely, that it meant that the methods of 1972 and 1974 were no longer effective. Kim Howells, the South Wales miners' talkative research officer, claimed towards the end of the strike that mass picketing had failed:

The state is much better organised for taking on mass pickets than it was in the early 1970s . . . It is the hardest lesson any workforce has had to learn since 1926. The whole of the organised labour movement has to take a fresh look in future disputes.³

Howell's nerve was staggering. He admitted in the same interview that 'there had been a deliberate policy against mass picketing in South Wales.' Indeed, throughout the coalfields the mass picketing strategy which brought victory in 1972 hadn't failed — it had not seriously been tried.

The leaders of the militant Areas did not concentrate their forces on specific targets until they closed them down, as the Yorkshire pickets did in 1972. Instead they resorted, certainly in Yorkshire, to gypsy picketing, sending miners haphazardly from one site to another. They did not campaign to build the pickets at important targets, relying instead on the secrecy of the envelope system. They allowed coal to leak through the miners' blockade through their policy of dispensations especially for the steel industry. They prevented attempts by militants to involve passive strikers in picketing their own pits once the back-to-work movement developed.

Of course, it is unlikely that even had these mistakes been avoided the miners would have won on their own. The decisive victory of Saltley in 1972 was only won thanks to the solidarity of Birmingham engineering workers. But the precondition of that action was consistent and vigorous picketing by the miners themselves. The miners could not expect to win the support of other workers unless they were seen themselves to picket massively.

The failure of the NUM leaders to organise mass picketing does not absolve the leaders of the rest of the trade union movement from responsibility for the miners' defeat. Of course, there was an argument in their defence — namely, that although some of them, the TUC lefts, genuinely wanted to help the miners win, they were unable to win the support of their rank and file. After all, one might say, the strike itself revealed clearly the scale of the downturn in the class

struggle — in, for example, the willingness of miners and other workers to cross NUM picket lines. The trade union leaders could hardly substitute themselves for a passive and divided rank and file.

The weakness of workplace organisation was undoubtedly one of the decisive features of the strike. Nevertheless, a large minority of trade unionists supported the miners, and were prepared to show this by donating food and money, and, in some cases, taking industrial action, even if this was usually of a token nature.

Precisely because of their lack of confidence in their own ability to deliver more decisive action, these workers looked to the left-wing trade union officials for a lead. Had the TGWU and similar unions given such a lead, had they instructed their members not to cross miners' picket lines, and campaigned to have these instructions observed, the outcome of the strike might have been very different. The activists who supported the miners could have been crystallised into a powerful movement for class-struggle methods. As it was, the resolutions of support for the miners remained pieces of paper, and opportunities such as the two dock strikes were squandered.

The end of class politics?

Running through such arguments that defeat was inevitable is a more general theme. In the wake of the strike many socialists are likely to argue that the outcome has exposed the traditional methods of economic class struggle — strikes, picketing, and so on — as obsolete. This view was put forward even before the strike ended, by Michael Ignatieff in the *New Statesman*:

There are those on the left who maintain that the miners' strike is a vindication of class-based politics after decades in which the agenda was defined by cross-class campaigns like feminism and CND. Yet the strike demonstrates the reverse: a labour movement which is incapable of presenting a class claim as a national claim, which can only pose its demands in the language of total victory, which takes on the state and ends up on the wrong side of the law cannot hope to conserve its support and legitimacy among the working-class public. The miners' strike is not the vindication of class politics, but its death throes.⁴

Others were not so forthright, but expressed broadly similar views. The most important example was that of the right, or Euro-communist, wing of the Communist Party, and the grouping with

which they are associated, the Labour Party 'soft left'. This grouping had a strong influence on the South Wales and, to a lesser extent, Scottish Areas of the NUM. Towards the end of the strike the soft left became more and more openly critical of 'Scargillism' — by which was meant class-struggle politics. The Communist Party's industrial organiser, Peter Carter, complained in **Marxism Today**:

What has failed to happen is the bringing together in a mass popular movement of those forces within our society that have already demonstrated sympathy for the miners. This development has been restricted because of a view held that the strike can be won by picketing alone, by the miners on their own.⁵

The miners would have won, the soft left suggested, if they had sought to build a 'broad democratic alliance' embracing forces far beyond the working class. Dave Cook wrote:

The more the miners have expressed their struggle in terms of their defence of the community, the future of youth, the role of women and the need for a new energy policy, and have linked up with other groups, for example progressive church people, the stronger they have been. The interweaving of their industrial strength with other forces and issues broke down their isolation which the media sought to impose on them.⁶

The model of this 'broad democratic alliance' was provided by the strategy pursued by the South Wales miners' leaders.

It is difficult to overstate the disastrous consequences which this strategy had for the strike. Emlyn Williams, Terry Thomas, Kim Howells, and the other members of the Area executive resisted attempts to shut down the steel industry, actively discouraged mass picketing, and relied instead on appeals to the legendary loyalty of South Wales miners to their union. In the end the passive solidarity of the strike in South Wales crumbled very quickly — partly because of the lobbying by some Area and branch officials for a return to work.

If the soft left strategy severely damaged the miners' union, this was partly because their analysis of British society is so flawed. There is no basis whatsoever for the claim that class politics is on the way out. In June 1984 there were 20,913,000 employees in Britain. Of these, at least three-quarters — more than 15 million people — were wage-labourers, compelled, in order to live, to sell their labour-power to capital.

The main effect of the recession has been to change the composi-

tion of the working class — to reduce the proportion of manual industrial workers, and increase that of white-collar employees. Many of the latter are, however, routine clerical workers, with no more power over the means of production, and often lower wages, than manual industrial workers. And despite the rundown of manufacturing industry, there were still 5,480,000 manufacturing workers in June 1984 — more than one in four of all employees.

Capitalism has reshaped the working class, not abolished it. Counterposed to this massive proletariat is a tiny capitalist class — one sociologist has estimated that the core of the business class is between 25,000 and 50,000 people, less than a thousandth of the population.

The miners' strike dramatically demonstrated the centrality of the class divisions of British society. The Tories resorted to all the traditional methods of class war — the police, the courts, the mass media — in order to isolate and crush the NUM. Blacklegging was resurrected on a scale undreamt of since the 1930s. The polarisation between labour and capital could not have been starker.

The miners did not fail because they used the methods of class struggle. On the contrary, most of their leaders were opposed to these methods, and often prevented attempts seriously to use mass picketing — sometimes under the influence of 'soft left' ideas. The NUM suffered from too little class politics, not too much.

The soft left justify their 'broad' strategy by invoking the omnipotence of Thatcherism. They grossly exaggerate the Tories' success. Economically, Thatcherism has been a failure — it was the Tories' inability to reduce real wages which forced them to attack the miners. Electorally, they have benefitted from a split opposition, and they have made only limited inroads even on the ideological front so emphasised by **Marxism Today**. Support for the welfare state actually grew during Thatcher's first term. Opinion polls consistently showed between 30 and 35 per cent of the public supporting the miners during the strike.

There were a number of points in the strike when the Tories were pushed onto the defensive — most notably during the first dock strike in July 1984, and then when it seemed as if NACODS was going to strike in October. Determined action by the rest of the trade union movement could have forced Thatcher to surrender. As it was, the Tories were saved, but less through the invulnerability of Thatcherism than thanks to the trade union leaders' refusal to take action in support of the NUM.

Thatcher's decisive superiority over the miners lay only in this

— she was willing to pursue a decisive and coherent strategy on behalf of her class. The trade union leaders were, by contrast, timid and indecisive, ready to sell the miners for a quiet life, while the behaviour of the official Labour Party leadership was beneath contempt.

One side in the miners' strike pursued class politics: the other didn't. Which side won?

The politics of the trade union bureaucracy

The fundamental reason why the miners lost their strike was because they were betrayed by the leaders of the trade union movement. But the leaders of the NUM itself cannot be absolved of all responsibility for the defeat. Above all, the leaders of the main left-wing Areas — Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales — consistently blocked attempts to use the methods necessary to win the strike.

The role played by Jack Taylor and the Yorkshire NUM leadership was especially important. During the great struggles of 1910–26 the South Wales Miners Federation was the largest district of the union and the pacemaker of militancy in the coalfields.

Since the late 1960s Yorkshire has played a similar part — the largest single Area and the main base of the rank-and-file organisation behind the strikes of 1969, 1970 and 1972. Arthur Scargill epitomised the militancy of the Yorkshire miners, just as fifty years earlier Cook was pushed forward by the struggles in the South Wales coalfield.

Consequently, the Yorkshire leadership's hesitations, vacillations, and sometimes outright obstruction had a decisive effect on the 1984–5 strike. The Yorkshire miners — and their counterparts in other coalfields — displayed sheer heroism in the way they sustained the strike. They deserved better leadership than they received.

But why did the Area leaders perform so disastrously? Was it simply a matter of personal failings on the part of people such as Jack Taylor (dubbed the 'Yorkshire Pudding' by pickets early on in the strike)?

The history of betrayal by trade union leaders is too long to put what happened in the miners' strike down to individual failings. Already at the end of the last century the American socialist Daniel de Leon denounced the trade union leaders as 'labour lieutenants of capital'. 'The Labour leader of today,' he wrote, is 'nothing but a masked battery, from behind which the Capitalist Class can encompass what it could not without — the work of enslaving and slowly degrading the Working Class.'⁷

The miners have had plenty of experience of trade union leaders' betrayals — they were deserted by the other unions belonging to the Triple Alliance on 'Black Friday', 15 April 1921, then, after the TUC had called off the General Strike on 12 May 1926, left to fight on alone for seven months. The pattern was the same in 1984–5, with both the right and the left of the TUC willing, on the whole, to give the miners verbal support, but not to translate it into action. Even when the NUM's assets were sequestered in early December, the TUC leadership refused to act.

This conduct was a consequence of the nature of the trade union leadership as a social group. Trade unions are in a contradictory position. They are the basic defence organisations of the working class, through which workers struggle to improve their wages and conditions, and to protect their jobs. Yet trade unions operate within the framework of capitalism. They strive to make workers *less* exploited, rather than to abolish capitalist exploitation altogether.

Workers thus struggle through trade unions both *against* capitalism, and *within* it. They seek to improve their situation, but within the limits of capitalism. This is reflected in the separation of politics and economics that is characteristic of trade unionism. Workers organise within production to improve their material conditions. Politics is treated as separate from this, as concerned above all with contesting and winning elections. Trade unions do not seek to mobilise workers' collective strength politically, against the power of the capitalist class concentrated in the state.

So long as workers limit their horizons to those set by capitalism, every struggle, however militant, must end in a compromise between capital and labour. Which side the compromise favours will depend on the relative strength of the two sides. Nevertheless, every strike finishes in a settlement and someone has to negotiate the compromises. A division of labour naturally emerges between workers and their representatives, whose time is increasingly spent bargaining with the employers.

So there arises the full-time trade union official. His (or, very occasionally, her) role cuts him off from the workers he represents. He is removed from the discipline of the shopfloor, with its dirt and dangers, from the daily conflicts with foreman and manager, from the fellowship of his workmates, to the very different environment of an office.

The official's earnings no longer depend on the ups and down of capitalist production — they no longer involve working overtime, nor

are they vulnerable to short-time or lay-offs. If a plant is closed, the official who negotiates the redundancies won't get the sack.

All these factors place the full-time official in a privileged position in comparison with rank-and-file trade unionists. They also give him the power and the incentive to usurp control of the union. Not only that, but the recognition given to trade union officials by the employers brings with it an increased social status, and the things that go with this — 'executive' salaries, free cars, subsidised houses, expense accounts, lucrative sinecures such as seats on government bodies, dinners with bosses, free trips round the world to international conferences.

Constantly closeted with management, the trade union official comes to see negotiation, compromise, collaboration with employers — class collaboration, as the very stuff of trade unionism. Struggle comes to seem a disruption of the bargaining process, a nuisance and an inconvenience. Because their privileges and power are bound up with the strength and prosperity of the union organisation, the officials identify the interests of the workers with those of the machine. As the great revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg put it, 'organisation . . . from being a means has been gradually changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of struggles should be subordinated.'⁸

All these factors conspire to make the trade union officials into a conservative bureaucracy, whose role is to negotiate the terms on which labour is exploited by capital, and whose interests are therefore different from, and opposed to those of the trade union rank and file.

The miners, as one of the first well-organised groups of workers in Britain, have long had to contend with this bureaucracy. Dave Douglass writes of the early days of the Durham Miners' Association, founded in 1869:

The full-time officials soon developed a particular character. Almost invariably they were drawn from the ranks of the moderate, self-educated, temperate miners. Once elected, they thought their role was to inflict upon the members their own moderation, and lead rather than serve. The members found they were being policed by the men to whom they were paying wages. The officials became more and more preoccupied with arbitration and conciliation as the cure for all ills, and more and more impatient of local action which ran up against it. The leadership rejoiced in the formality of the conciliation machinery

. . . preferring any course of action, 'even simple submission', in preference to a strike.⁹

The bitter conflict between bureaucracy and rank and file during the Cambrian Combine Strike of 1910–11 led a group of militant socialists in the South Wales Miners Federation to produce **The Miners' Next Step** in 1912. They argued that the officials

are Trade Unionists by trade and their profession demands certain privileges. The greatest of these are plenary powers. Now, every inroad the rank and file make on this privilege lessens the power and prestige of the leader . . . The leader has an interest — a vested interest — in stopping progress. The condition of things in South Wales has reached the point when this difference of interest, this antagonism, has become manifest. Hence the men criticise and are discontent with their leaders. But the remedy is not new leaders.

Even militant workers are, however, reluctant to believe that 'the remedy is not new leaders'. It is natural to think that the betrayals which take place are the fault of individuals. Get rid of them, replace them with good fighters, and all will be well. So arises the struggle between left and right within the trade union bureaucracy. The division reflects the belief of militant trade unionists that by electing left-wing officials they can avoid future betrayals.

The strategy of the Broad Lefts inside the different unions today is based on this belief — the idea that the movement can be won to class-struggle politics by capturing the official machine. The belief is not a new one. In the run-up to the General Strike the TUC fell under the sway of a number of prominent left-wingers — Alonzo Swales, A. A. Purcell, and George Hicks. These made very radical speeches. Purcell told the 1924 TUC that the unions should be transformed into 'an instrument of solidarity capable of challenging the existing structure of capitalism and bringing into being a Workers' State.'

Yet when it came to it, Purcell, Swales and Hicks were as deeply implicated in the betrayal of the miners as such open right-wingers as J. H. Thomas and Ernest Bevin. Even A. J. Cook, the left-wing secretary of the Miners' Federation, vacillated. In July 1926 he held secret talks with Sir William Layton and Seebohm Rowntree over a possible end to the lockout, without informing the MFGB. Cook recommended the resulting compromise, and he appealed to the miners to 'face the facts'. (As it turned out, both the government and

rank-and-file miners rejected the proposals.)

Even the most dedicated and militant socialist is likely to become a prisoner of the machine once elected to full-time office. We have seen how the rank-and-file organisation in the Yorkshire coalfield which brought victory in the early 1970s atrophied after the left had come to power.

The change had disastrous consequences once the strike broke out in March 1984. For Jack Taylor and his like the union had indeed become an end in itself. Picketing was restrained, both because it might deplete union funds and because it might cause the courts to seize the Area's assets. In Yorkshire and elsewhere the Area leaders relied instead on their links with other trade union officials, through the Triple Alliance and the like.

Had rank-and-file organisation been as strong as it was in the early 1970s this wouldn't have mattered so much. As it was, ordinary miners, lacking confidence in their own power, looked to the official to give a lead. The result was a slow spiral to defeat.

The limits of Scargillism

Arthur Scargill stands out as the apparent exception to what we have said about trade union officials. From the strike's very beginning it was, as far as Fleet Street was concerned, 'Scargill's Strike'. The miners' president was the victim of a campaign of vilification gross even by the standards of **The Sun** and the rest of the gutter press. Equally, for the striking miners he was a hero, the symbol of their determination to fight. 'Arthur Scargill walks on water', they sang, and many other trade unionists joined them.

As the strike was driven further and further onto the defensive, the Labour right wing began to aim their fire directly at Scargill. The **Daily Mirror** declared on 28 January 1985: 'Arthur Scargill has lost the miners' strike. It is his defeat more than theirs. He has led the crack guards regiment of the unions to disaster. No one else is to blame.'

One of the most scurrilous attacks on Scargill came from Jimmy Reid, leader of the Upper Clyde Shipyard occupation of 1971 and an old friend of the miners' leader. Reid, now a Labour right-winger, told a **Channel 4** television audience that 'Arthur Scargill is the best thing that's happened to Mrs Thatcher since General Galtieri invaded the Falklands.'¹⁰

Behind Reid's gutter language — 'Scargillism strengthens

Thatcherism', 'Scargillism is the politics of infantilism' — was almost certainly the hand of Neil Kinnock, who let it be known that 'he will not be made a scapegoat by his party's hard left for the expected defeat of Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers.'¹¹

Attacks like Reid's should be treated with the contempt they deserve. But what role did Scargill play in the strike, and what responsibility does he have for its defeat?

We have argued that a strategy of mass picketing could have brought victory. Throughout the strike Scargill advocated such a strategy. This led him to clash seriously with the Yorkshire Area leadership in particular during the summer of 1984. Is Scargill that exception to the rule, a trade union leader who meant what he said?

There are many who believe that he is. One of them is John Lloyd, the ex-Maoist labour editor of the **Financial Times**. Early on in the strike Lloyd wrote: 'Arthur Scargill is the most serious revolutionary socialist in the UK, maybe in Western Europe.'¹² Ten months later Lloyd tried to explain Scargill to the businessmen (and the odd socialist) who read the **FT**:

From the outside . . . the NUM president appears a man willing to resort to any ruse, manipulate any fact, use any person, in support of his ultimate purpose of maintaining the strike. So he is. But he has also been unwaveringly faithful and honest in pursuing the policies laid down by the NUM's national conference, constitutionally the union's highest body. It prescribed complete opposition, through industrial action if necessary, to pit closures, no ifs and buts . . .

Mr Scargill was the country's ace activist and *remains one still*: he has the activist's absolute fidelity in the outcome of the internal process, very little, almost none perceived, of the presidential need to balance militancy with caution, rhetoric with reality . . . he is the activist's dream.¹³

Undoubtedly, Arthur Scargill is one of the most outstanding leaders the British working-class movement has had. His performance during the 1984–5 strike was astonishing. The determination with which he used every resource at his command to prevent surrender to the Tories and the Coal Board should win the admiration of every socialist. At several junctures, Scargill and the pickets together stopped the strike from collapsing. There is simply no comparison between Scargill and most other trade union leaders.

But the qualities which mark Scargill out as an exceptional

individual do not make him an inexplicable genius. There seem to be two crucial ingredients to his political make-up. One is his experience of the struggles of the 1960s and the early 1970s. More than any other leading figure in the British labour movement Scargill believes that the industrial power displayed by the miners in 1972 and 1974 should be used for political ends, as part of the struggle to achieve a socialist society in Britain. He told **Marxism Today** in April 1981:

Anyone who believes that we can achieve socialism simply by electing a number of MPs is deluding themselves. We will win parliamentary power, we will win working-class power to the extent that we organise people in this country to fight for, and sustain, the alternative socialist system that we want to see. Parliaments do not necessarily reflect the views of ordinary people, and if you have a Parliament that is not being pushed by a working-class movement demanding, expecting and requiring change, then you will not get that change.

Scargill's belief in the creative role of industrial struggle in the fight for socialism draws him towards his hero A. J. Cook. Cook was influenced by revolutionary syndicalism, the idea that the trade unions would be the instrument for overthrowing capitalism. But Scargill remains committed to the Labour Party as the main vehicle of change. He told **New Left Review** in 1975: 'I think that the ideal way that the working class can achieve working-class power is to change the Labour Party.' Scargill does not reject the parliamentary road to socialism: rather, he believes it cannot succeed without industrial action.

The second ingredient of Scargill's politics is the influence of the ideas of 'socialism from above', ideas common to both Labourism and Stalinism.

Scargill's view of the working-class movement is one in which the initiative comes from the top. 'Leadership' is the key word in Scargill's political vocabulary. In 1975 he contrasted the situation in Yorkshire before and after he took over the Area NUM:

If you have a right-wing leadership in any union, the whole philosophy, the entire ideology, the notions of that leadership will permeate through the union . . . No one will deny that, whether it be a right-wing union or a left-wing union, the fact that you're able to channel out information, ideas, propaganda, is of immense benefit to the membership, or of immense *harm* to the membership . . .

... there have been tremendous strides forward in Yorkshire in the miners' union. It's been done because we have a left-progressive leadership that has been willing to stand up and say 'no' to the Coal Board, that has been prepared to fight for those principles and aims we believe in . . . It's precisely because that sort of leadership has been given on the question of wages and conditions that we have won support.¹⁴

Scargill is right. Leadership is important. The real crime of the left-wing leadership of the TGWU is that they have not been prepared to give a positive lead to their members. Scargill has. On the whole, he stuck by his guns. But he appears to believe that 'left-progressive leadership' is the decisive factor in workers' struggles. This is simply wrong.

It was rank-and-file organisation — initiatives from below — which won the 1972 strike, *despite* the right-wing leadership of the national and Yorkshire Area unions. Even in 1984–5, Scargill was sustained by the confidence of the rank and file. Without the support of the active strikers, and their determination to fight, he could not so often have beaten the NUM right and soft left, however skilful his tactical manoeuvres.

Scargill's stress on the role of 'Marxist, progressive, left-wing leadership' leads him to see change coming from the top. His strategy for the left within the unions is essentially an electoral one — socialists should organise to capture the official machine. Scargill's difference from the rest of the Broad Left lies only in his opposition to backsliding by 'progressive' officials. But the betrayals committed by left union leaders is not a consequence of their lack of moral fibre. It is the inevitable result of their position in the social structure.

The only counter to the bureaucracy lies in independent rank-and-file organisation. Such organisation has a history in Britain dating back to the early part of the century. The First World War threw up the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Control Movement, whose attitude to the bureaucracy was summed up by the Clyde Workers' Committee in their first leaflet, printed in November 1915:

We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule of law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately

according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.

Scargill's attitude is very different from this. He helped build the Barnsley Miners' Forum in the late 1960s, openly organising the rank and file in defiance of the right-wing Area leadership. But he pursued this strategy precisely because the right controlled the official machine. Once the left had captured the Yorkshire NUM, the Forum was allowed to wither and die. The lesson of 1972 — the decisive role played by unofficial, rank-and-file leadership — was not learned.

This had disastrous consequences in 1984–5. Throughout the strike Scargill operated through the official machine. During the crucial early weeks when Nottinghamshire hung in the balance, Scargill allowed himself to be bound by the constitutional nicety that the strike was a collection of rolling Area strikes, and he did not intervene publicly to campaign to bring out wavering miners.

Again, Scargill found his strategy of mass picketing blocked by the left-wing Area officials in April, May and June. This conflict surfaced, above all, over Orgreave. Scargill did not break openly with Jack Taylor, Mick McGahey and Emlyn Williams. He did not publicly call on the active strikers to defy their Area and branch officials and shut off the supply of coal to the big steelworks. He did not encourage the formation of unofficial strike committees under rank-and-file control.

Had Scargill done so, with his enormous prestige among the activists, the story of the strike might have been very different.

Throughout the long war of attrition waged by the Coal Board and the scabs against the NUM, Scargill maintained a public united front with the rest of the left on the national executive. He did not interfere when left branch officials hindered the activists' efforts to counter the back-to-work movement.

When Yorkshire and South Wales officials began to press for surrender in early 1985 Scargill did not openly challenge them. Those outside the executive were left to infer the differences from hints, innuendo, and private briefings.

In the absence of any attempt to develop independent rank-and-file organisation, Scargill sought to sustain the strike and drive it forward through sheer will-power. It is impossible not to admire the determination, courage and tactical skill that Scargill displayed. But it remained the attempt of an individual to substitute for the collective organisation needed to win the strike.

Any strategy which rests on the determination and commitment of individual leaders is bound to fail. In spite of his outstanding performance in the strike, Arthur Scargill cannot avoid his share of blame for the miners' defeat. What matters though, is less to condemn individuals' failures, than to draw the correct political conclusions.

Labourism and the revolutionary alternative

The approach of left-wing trade union leaders — even the best of them — embodies a certain view of how to change society, one in which change comes from above, from the leaders at the top. This view is not confined to the trade unions. Indeed, its stronghold is the Labour Party. Labour's is a parliamentary road to socialism, which supposes that change will come through capturing the existing state machine.

On this view, the decisive agents of change are to be the Labour MPs whose election leads to the formation of a socialist government. The role of the mass of working people is passive — simply to vote these MPs into office. Socialism comes from above.

It is this strategy for change which explains the strange schizophrenia of the Labour Party during the miners' strike — the despicable part played by its leader, and the magnificent support given the miners by many party activists.

There was nothing new about Neil Kinnock's contortions during the miners' strike. Exactly the same pattern of hostility or indifference to workers' struggles has been displayed by every Labour leader. Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour prime minister, wrote in 1924: 'Strikes for increased wages . . . not only are not socialism, but may mislead the spirit and the policy of socialism.' His government used anti-union legislation to declare states of emergency aimed at the 1924 docks and London tram strikes.

Although MacDonald was also hostile to the General Strike, the Labour Party benefitted from its defeat. Many workers concluded that industrial action had failed and therefore looked to the ballot box as the main means of changing society. Labour achieved its best result so far in the next general election, in 1929, and formed a minority government. MacDonald presided over the opening years of the Great Depression, did nothing while unemployment soared, and then in 1931 broke with Labour and formed a coalition with the Tories.

The 1945 Labour government represents, for left-wing members of the Labour Party, the high-water mark of their history, the era of

such social reforms as the creation of the National Health Service. It was also a time when Labour cabinet ministers were prepared to use the army against strikers, not once, but on a number of occasions — for example, during the dock strike of October 1945.

In August 1945 the new Home Secretary, James Chuter Ede, proposed reviving the Supply and Transport Organisation, which had been used by Stanley Baldwin to break the General Strike. This organisation, now renamed the Civil Contingencies Unit, was used against the miners in 1984–5.

The behaviour of more recent Labour governments has been similar. Harold Wilson resorted to crude anti-Communist witch-hunting techniques to defeat the 1966 seamen's strike, and tried to introduce legislation to ban unofficial strikes. The Labour government of 1974–9 used the army against the Glasgow dustmen in 1975, and against the firefighters' strike of 1977–8. In the latter, the Cabinet committee which decided to send in the troops included the Energy Secretary, Tony Benn.

This pattern of strikebreaking is too persistent to be explained as simply a matter of bad leadership. Every Labour government has set itself against workers in struggle. Why?

The answer is to be found in Labour's basic political strategy.

Even the most radical and militant Labour Party member believes that socialism can be achieved only by winning a majority of seats in parliament — though many Labour activists combine this belief with support for workers' struggles, arguing that society can be transformed by combining parliamentary and 'extra-parliamentary' action.

Thus, two leading members of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, Peter Hain and Jean McCrindle, criticised Neil Kinnock because 'he has appeared to view the [miners'] strike as an embarrassing diversion from the "real" task of winning electoral support.' Instead they argued that 'extra-parliamentary battles' should be 'seen as opportunities to be seized in order to rebuild working-class confidence in Labour.'¹⁵

There is, however, a profound contradiction involved in socialists seeking to combine what Eric Heffer once called 'the class struggle in Parliament' with active participation in workers' struggles. Large-scale strikes tend to develop into a conflict with the state. The miners' strike illustrated this very well: not only were the police deployed on a massive scale against the miners, but the effective conduct of the strike required the NUM's defiance of the law, as was shown by the interference of the courts at all levels from picketing to seizure of the

national union's assets.

The state is not a neutral umpire which arbitrates in the class struggle between capital and labour. The state is the most concentrated form of power of the employing class, and so will inevitably be used against workers' struggles.

This creates a dilemma for the Labour Party as an organisation committed to using this very same state to transform society. Labour is forced to choose between parliament and the 'extra-parliamentary' struggle. Entirely consistently, the Labour leaders have always taken the side of parliament and the state. J. H. Thomas, the railwaymen's leader and a Labour front bencher, put it very well during the General Strike of 1926: 'In a challenge to the constitution God helps us unless the government won.'

Labour's electoralism itself pushes it rightwards. Voting is a passive and individual activity, in which people's preferences are formed under a massive barrage of capitalist propaganda from the press and TV. Parliamentary elections are therefore a most unfavourable terrain for socialist politics. Winning them means playing down any challenge to the existing order and currying favour with a 'public opinion' orchestrated by Fleet Street. Neil Kinnock's evasions and media gimmicks are not simply a reflection of his ambition and political vacuity. They are an entirely logical strategy for a Labour leader to pursue at a time when weakened organisation and mass redundancies have pushed working-class opinion rightwards, when many militants are demoralised, and the Alliance has split the anti-Tory vote.

Whether Labour gains electorally from the miners' defeat, as it did after 1926, remains to be seen. It is certainly likely that many of those active in the strike will be drawn towards the Labour Party, despite Kinnock's appalling performance. They will conclude that the failure of industrial struggle means that the only avenue open to changing society is through parliament. Many miners politicised by the strike have joined Labour in the hope of changing the party.

The Labour left are, however, just as much affected by the dilemmas of reformism as the right wing. They too are committed to a parliamentary road to socialism. This means accepting the prevailing division between politics and economics, electoralism and trade unionism. Tony Benn illustrates this.

Unlike Kinnock, Tony Benn was unequivocally committed to the miners' cause, and worked unceasingly for their victory. However, on the central issue of the strike — the failure of the TUC to support the miners — he was silent. Benn did not use his considerable

prestige to campaign for the leaders of left-wing unions such as the TGWU to issue instructions to their members to black scab coal and oil. And more generally, the hard Labour left did not challenge Kinnock's leadership, despite his attitude to the strike. Because their strategy too depends on winning elections, and this keeps the Labour left part of a 'broad church' which embraces right-wingers like Denis Healey.

The miners' defeat is likely to push the centre of gravity of the labour movement further rightwards. Already in January 1985, once it was clear that the NUM was on the ropes, Kinnock took to the offensive against the hard left. He put strong pressure on Labour councils not to defy the Tories' rate-capping legislation, backed an inquiry designed to find ideological grounds for expelling the left-wing **Militant** tendency, and denounced Tony Benn and other Campaign Group MPs, who disrupted the House of Commons to demand a debate on the strike, for being 'wiling to fight to the last drop of miners' blood'.

Sections of the Labour left began to make their peace with Kinnock. Two left-wingers on the party national executive, Michael Meacher and David Blunkett, came out against Labour councils' defying rate-capping legislation. Then, within a week of the strike ending, the Labour group on the Greater London Council split when GLC leader Ken Livingstone argued that the council should obey the law and set a legal rate. Kinnock had the Labour left on the run.

Such compromises on the part of Labour left wingers are nothing new. Time and again socialists have tried to make the Labour Party into an instrument of radical change. Their efforts have always been frustrated by the dominant coalition of right-wing parliamentary leaders and the trade union bureaucracy with their massive block vote. Successive left-wing leaders have usually ended up surrendering to the right wing — Stafford Cripps, Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot. Those who stood firm, like James Maxton, were driven into the wilderness.

There is only one way of breaking out of this frustrating cycle of right-wing leadership and left-wing impotence and betrayal. That is to reject the fundamental premiss of Labourism, shared by all its factions from far right to hard left — that socialism can be achieved through parliament, by capturing control of the existing state machine.

The state is not a neutral umpire. It is the basic underpinning of capitalist class domination. The flagrant contempt with which police chiefs ignored the opposition of elected local authorities to their

strike-breaking activities, the naked class bias with which the courts ruled consistently against the miners' union, the single-mindedness with which the Tory government mobilised all the resources at its disposal to defeat the NUM — all these illustrate the simple truth that the state is nothing but the concentrated power of capital.

The state is the employing class's last line of defence. Usually capital's economic and ideological power is sufficient to head off challenges. The pressure exerted by the world money markets was enough to force the 1964 and 1974 Labour governments to tear up their election manifestoes and attack working-class living standards. But there are always what Lenin called the 'special bodies of armed men' — the army, police, and security services — waiting in the background, as the Chilean working class learned to their cost in September 1973.

Socialism cannot come through parliament, but only as a result of workers organising to overthrow the existing state machine and replace it with their own power. Only the collective strength which workers possess in production — in the factories, offices, hospitals, yes, and in the mines — can defeat the organised might of capital.

Again and again through the present century workers' struggles have thrown up forms of organisation which transcend the limits of trade unionism. These have many names — the *soviets* in Russia 1905 and 1917, the workers' and soldiers' councils in Germany 1918, the *cordones* in Chile 1972–3, *Solidarnosc* in Poland 1980–1. What they have in common is that they began to organise workers on a class-wide basis, transcending the sectional divisions built into trade unionism, and break down the reformist barrier between economics and politics, challenging the power of the capitalist state.

Through such bodies, councils of workplace delegates elected by and accountable to the rank and file, workers can both overthrow the existing state, and create one of their own, based on the most thoroughgoing democracy.

Alas, the 1984–5 miners' strike did not see even the remotest beginnings of workers' councils. But it did provide a glimpse of how workers can be won to socialism. It is through their own struggle that workers develop the organisation and confidence necessary to overthrow capitalism. More than this, involvement in struggle alters workers' view of the world. They are no longer passive and isolated individuals, but part of a collective that is acting to change the world, in however small a way. They also discover the reality of class society.

Of no struggle is this more true than the miners' strike. The men

and women of the pit communities began the strike in the main accepting the view of the world given by the mass media: that the police are there to protect us, that black people are unwelcome 'aliens', that women's role is to be passive sex objects and childbearers.

The experience of the strike transformed these men and women. They soon learned the truth about the police — many of them the hard way, under a truncheon or boot. The women began to organise, discovering undreamt-of abilities and challenging the traditional sexual division of labour in the family. Mining men and women travelled the country picketing and seeking solidarity. They began to make political connections. They met black people and discovered that they too were persecuted by the state. Their views about sexuality began to change when they came across lesbians and gays who supported their strike. They started to see analogies between their villages under police siege and the Catholic ghettos in the north of Ireland.

Perhaps these experiences will have a lasting effect on only a minority of those involved, once the pressures of everyday life reassert themselves. Nevertheless, the strike dramatically demonstrated the possibilities inherent in workers' struggles — their capacity to transform the working class.

It follows that to achieve socialism requires a different sort of party from the Labour Party. Such a party would focus, not on elections, but on workers in struggle, using every strike as an opportunity to raise the general level of socialist consciousness. Such a party would seek, not to appeal to the lowest common denominator, but to organise the small minority of workers who are at present convinced of the need for revolutionary socialism in order to relate to the vast majority who at present are not.

The crisis in which both British and world capitalism are caught up means there will be more struggles like the miners' strike. Capital can solve its problems only by attacking working-class organisation and living standards. When it does, the larger and better organised the revolutionary minority, the greater the chance of avoiding the defeat the miners suffered in 1985.

The ultimate reason why the miners lost was because capital had a determined, ruthless, highly class-conscious leadership while the working class did not. Fortunately the working class lost only a battle in 1985. But to win the war will require a different sort of leadership, one which builds on every workers' struggle in order to launch eventually an assault on the citadel of capitalist power in the state machine.

The leadership given by a revolutionary party would not seek to substitute itself for workers' struggles. Rather it would seek to make these struggles conscious and directed not just at an individual employer but at the capitalist state that stands behind *every* employer.

Revolutionary socialism is socialism from below, arising from the self-activity of the working class rather than from the initiatives of trade union and parliamentary leaders at the top. Those working to achieve the self-emancipation of the working class can take inspiration from the miners' example. The daring and initiative with which they launched the strike, the courage and endurance with which they waged it, the pride and defiance with which they ended it — all were a powerful vindication of the capacity of the working class to transform society.

The memory of the Great Miners' Strike of 1984–5 will always shine as an example of working people's heroism and determination. We can say of the mining communities, as Karl Marx wrote of the first workers' revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, after its defeat:

Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be for ever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.

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